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ABSTRACT

Designed to assess listeners' comprehension of ambiguous and polysemous utterances, this instrument is a series of 24 statements that include varying degrees and types of ambiguity. Subjects listen to prerecorded audio tapes of these statements, presented in a neutral tone that provides no stress or pitch cues to aid "disambiguation." Subjects are asked to explain each statement, and only those interpretations similar to paraphrases agreed upon by expert validators are considered correct. (This document is one of those reviewed in The Research Instruments Project (TRIP) monograph "Measures for Research and Evaluation in the English Language Arts, Volume 2," published by the Committee on Research of the National Council of Teachers of English in cooperation with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. The TRIP review, included here as an introduction to the instrument, describes the instrument's category (language), title, author, date, age range (ages 7 through adult), purpose, and physical characteristics.) (HTH)

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Comprehension of Ambiguity and Other Polysemous Utternances: Presented in Spoken Mode.

The measurement instruments contained in this document have been reviewed in a monograph (cited below) edited by William T. Fagan, Charles Cooper, and Julie Jensen, for The Research Instruments Project (TRIP), and funded by a grant from the Trustees of the NCTE Research Foundation:

Measures for Research and Evaluation
in the
English Language Arts
Volume II

The purpose of the editors has been to select and review measurement instruments pertaining to all aspects of research and evaluation in the English language arts, e.g. language and language development, literacy, literature, reading (including comprehension, teacher-pupil interaction, etc.), writing, and teacher knowledge and attitudes. In order to make some of the actual instruments reviewed more readily available, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (ERIC/RCS) has cooperated with the editors by processing selected instruments into the ERIC system (see the 42 documents assigned Clearinghouse accession numbers CS 207 904-945).

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Category: Language and Language Development

Title: Comprehension of Ambiguity and Other Polysemous Utterances: Presented in Spoken Mode

Author: Rita S. Brause

Age Range: Age Seven through Adult

Description of Instrument:

Purpose: To assess listeners' comprehension of ambiguous and polysemous utterances.

Date of Construction: 1975

Physical Description: This instrument is a series of twenty-four statements which include varying degrees and types of ambiguity. Each of three sets of eight items include, in the order listed, the following types of ambiguity: 1) one meaning of a word in an unambiguous context, 2) a second meaning of the same word in an unambiguous context, 3) multiplicity of pronoun referents, 4) figurative language, 5) symbolic language of proverbs, 6) lexical ambiguity, 7) surface structure ambiguity, and 8) deep structure ambiguity. In individual interviews, subjects listen to "endless" pre-recorded audio-tapes of these statements, presented in a neutral tone that provides no stress or pitch cues to aid disambiguation. Subjects are asked to explain each statement. Only those interpretations similar to paraphrases agreed upon by expert validators are considered correct. Following is the first set of eight statements:

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1. The boy is a member of the chess club.

Paraphrases:

X Club means a group of people.
Club means a stick or a weapon used for protection.

2. The policeman brought a heavy club for protection when going to stop the fight.

Paraphrases:

Club means a group of people.
X Club means a stick or a weapon used for protection.

3. Mickey knew that he was going to be late (Chomsky, C., 1969).

Paraphrases:

X Mickey Mouse knew that Mickey himself was going to be late.
X Mickey Mouse knew that someone else (Donald Duck) was going to be late.
Mickey is always late.

4. Aunt Helen spilled the beans.

Paraphrases:

Aunt Helen likes to cook beans.
X Aunt Helen told someone's secret.
X Aunt Helen allowed the beans that she was preparing to fall out of the pot or the dish.

5. Little streams make mighty rivers (Piaget, 1955.)

Paraphrases:

X Small streams of water may become mighty by becoming part of rivers.
Small amounts of water help the river to grow.
X Small or young people may grow to be important or influential adults or grown-ups.

6. The policeman took his club to the riot.

Paraphrases:

X The policeman carried his own stick to a riot.
The policeman is attending a meeting of his group.
X The policeman brought his fellow club members to a fight or riot.

7. They fed her dog biscuits.

Paraphrases:

X A girl is being given biscuits to eat which are usually eaten by dogs.
X A girl's dog is being given biscuits to eat.
A dog is being given some meat to eat.

8. The mayor will ask the police to stop drinking.

Paraphrases:

X The mayor will ask the police to stop their own drinking.
The mayor visited all the bars in the city.
X The mayor asked the police to stop other people from drinking.

*X denotes paraphrases considered acceptable.

Validity, Reliability and Normative Data:

Content validity for statements used is based on their selection from theoretical and empirical sources such as Piaget and C. Chomsky. Interrater reliability for scoring answers was established at the .96 level. A Guttman scaling of reproducibility of findings in the hierarchy of comprehension yielded a coefficient of .97. A hypothesized hierarchy of acquisition was developed based on the findings, and related in part to age and educational background:

Stage One:	Understanding of two meanings of a word when presented in unambiguous contexts.
Stage Two:	Understanding lexical ambiguity. Understanding figurative language.
Stage Three:	Understanding surface structure ambiguity. Understanding multiplicity of pronoun referents.
Stage Four:	Understanding deep structure ambiguity.

Related Documents:

Brause, Rita S. "Developmental Aspects of the Ability to Understand Semantic Ambiguity with Implications for Teachers." Research in the Teaching of English 11 (Spring 1977): 39-48. (EJ 160 312)

Brause, Rita S. "On Ambiguity: An Investigation of the Development of the Ability to Understand Semantic Ambiguity." Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1975. Dissertation Abstracts International 36. (1975): 2173-A.

SENTENCES USED DURING INTERVIEW*

1. The boy is a member of the chess club.

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   X Club means a group of people.
   Club means a stick or a weapon used for protection.

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8. The mayor will ask the police to stop drinking.

Paraphrases:

X The mayor will ask the police to stop their own drinking.
The mayor visited all the bars in the city.
X The mayor asked the police to stop other people from drinking.

9. Don't turn to the left; turn to the right.

Paraphrases:

X Right means the opposite of left.
Right means correct; it means the opposite of wrong.

10. Joe was right when he said it would be sunny today.

Paraphrases:

Right means the opposite of left; direction.
X Right means the opposite of wrong; correct.

11. John convinced Bill that he should leave.

Paraphrases:

X John convinced Bill that John should leave.
X John convinced Bill that Bill should leave.
John convinced Bill that everyone should leave.
X John convinced Bill that a third person (Bob) should leave.

12. She is walking on air.

Paraphrases:

She walks on hair.
X She's so happy that she feels as if she is flying instead of walking.
X Instead of walking on the sidewalk, she is imagining that she is walking two feet above the ground.

13. A stitch in time, saves nine.

Paraphrases:

X If one stitch is needed and it is put in when it is seen that it is needed, nine stitches won't be needed later.
X If we anticipate or think ahead about something happening, we can plan ahead and save time later.
Stitching on a sewing machine saves time.

14. Why do people usually put on the right shoe first?

Paraphrases:

X Right is the opposite of left; direction.
X Right is the opposite of wrong; correct.
Right means to scribble.

(If participant only accepts right - not left, he is told: This is a riddle. The answer is: Because it would be silly to put on the wrong shoe. What meaning of right were they looking for? - or could you explain what that means? Now what meanings would you accept for right in that sentence?)

15. The doctor saw the old Indian dance.

Paraphrases:

X A doctor watched while one Indian who was old, danced.
The doctor examined the Indian or gave the Indian a check-up.
X The doctor watched a very old dance that Indians used to do.

16. John knows a taller man than Bill.

Paraphrases:

X John knows Bill who is tall, but John knows a man who is taller than Bill is.

X John knows a taller man than Bill knows.
John knows that Bill is a tall man.

17. I may need my car to carry the package because the package is not as light as I thought it would be.

Paraphrases:

X Light means not heavy; it's concerned with weight.

18. The color of her dress was such a light pink that it looked like white.

Paraphrases:

X The color of her dress was a very pale pink.

19. John told Harry that his wife was pretty (McCawley, 1970).

Paraphrases:

X John told Harry that Harry's wife was pretty.
X John told Harry that John's wife was pretty.
X John told Harry that a third man's wife was pretty.

20. He is tied up at a meeting.

Paraphrases:

X A man is busy and cannot be disturbed.

X A man is bound with rope and tied to a chair at a meeting.

21. Still water runs deep.

Paraphrases:

X A quiet person might be a deep thinker.
X Bodies of water that do not appear to move on the surface, are often deep, and therefore move below the surface.

22. He wore a light suit.

Paraphrases:

X The man wore a suit of a light color.
X The man wore a suit made of light-weight fabric.
X The man wore a suit made of light bulbs.

23. The teacher spoke to the boy with a smile.

Paraphrases:

X The teacher was smiling while speaking to the boy.
X The teacher spoke to a boy who was smiling.

24. Sam thinks more of Jane than Bob.

Paraphrases:

X Sam thinks more highly (or more often) of Jane than he (Sam) thinks of Bob.
X Sam thinks more highly (or more often) of Jane than Bob thinks of Jane.